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ABSTRACT

Differences in self-descriptive patterns of adults who dropped out of high school completion courses and those who completed their courses were examined using the Adjective Check List (ACL) to measure adult personality attributes. Subjects (N=142) were asked to endorse those adjectives which best described themselves and to skip those which did not. At the end of 10 weeks, 29 students had dropped their studies while 113 either completed or were still active in the program. Stepwise discriminant analysis yielded 35 ACL variables which predicted group membership. In general, persisting students endorsed more positive adjectives while dropouts used many more adjectives in describing themselves. Results suggest that, at the time of enrollment, the self-concept as described by personally endorsed adjectives can differentiate those students with high attrition risk from those likely to persist. (Author/HLM)

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A COMPARISON OF THE SELF-DESCRIPTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION (GED) DROPOUTS AND PERSISTERS

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Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if there were any appreciable differences in the self-descriptive patterns on the Adjective Check List of those adults who drop out of their high school completion courses, compared with the patterns of those adults who complete their courses. The Adjective Check List of Gough (1952) was used to measure personality attributes of the adults. The study sought that reduced set of self-descriptors which would discriminate between persisters and dropouts with at least 95% accuracy.

Significance of the Study

The ill effects of the dropout problem are several. Persons who usually already have educational problems and a negative attitude toward educational institutions again find themselves cut off from opportunities. There is a loss to the society as a whole because of the lack of education of numbers of its members. Attrition discourages the other class members and persons considering continuing their education. And, when adult education is evaluated in light of its pupil loss, it may be subjected to budget cuts and loss of resources (Verner and Davis, 1964; Hurkamp, 1968; Boshier, 1972).

Griffith (1970) pointed out that too often in adult education univariate solutions are sought for multivariate problems. For instance, Anderson and Niemi (1970) have made reference to the tendency of teachers of adults to attribute non-perseverance to a lack of motivation on the part of the student. Such generalizations have contributed little towards resolution of causative factors affecting retention of adult learners. "...motivation is extremely complex and imperfectly understood, it is best seen within the

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framework of an adult's needs, goals, habits, values, and self-concept (Verner and Davison, 1971, p. 4)."

Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume in discussing dropouts among adult students that such persons were sufficiently motivated to initially enroll in a class or program. Thus, a broader base of knowledge relating to individual characteristics, including personality factors, of educationally disadvantage adult students at the time of entry into instructional programs seemingly would aid instructional personnel in better serving individual learners and thereby encourage continued involvement in the program.

Review of the Literature

Adults enrolled in high school equivalency programs have for some reason not completed their secondary education in the regular high school. They are previous dropouts from the school setting. For this reason, it was assumed that research into the nature of the high school dropout would be related to the adult high school completion population.

Blough (1956) reviewed 801 studies and references to the secondary school dropout problem for the period 1872 to 1956. He catagorized the reasons for the students' dropping out and ranked them according to the frequency cited in the research:

(1) socio-economic status
(2) financial need
(3) preference of work over school
(4) mental ability
(5) lack of interest
(6) retardation (repeated grades)
(7) parental attitude
(8) failure

Tesseneer and Tesseneer (1958) reviewed twenty reports of research and

drew a composite picture of the high school dropout:

> Studies of dropouts have revealed a number of characteristics that many of them have in common.
> Most dropouts, or at least many:
> 1. are sixteen or seventeen years of age and are retarded by one or more grades
> 2. are from low-income families
> 3. are discouraged with their work, or are failing at the time of leaving
> 4. are dissatisfied with teaching methods
> 5. have a feeling of 'not belonging'
> 6. leave because of the lure of a job
> 7. are from weak or broken homes (p. 143).

The involvement and retention of adults in educational programs has been and still is a major concern for paractitioners of adult education. The Adult Education Association Research Committee in 1955, considered it "...one of the foremost problems facing adult educators...(Spence and Evans, 1956, p. 221)."

"The majority of research on participation in adult education has centered around describing the characteristics of participants in various educational programs as compared to nonparticipants (Douglah, 1970, p. 91)." Houle (1961) identified three goal orientations given as reasons for participation by learners:

> The first, or, as they will be called, the goal-oriented, are those who use education as means of accomplishing fairly clearcut objectives. The second, the activity-oriented, are those who take part because they find in the circumstances of learning a meaning which has no necessary connection, and often no connection at all, with the content or the announced purpose of the activity. The third, the learning-oriented, seek knowledge for its own sake (pp. 15-16).

Persons of lower socio-economic status have generally been shown to have spent less time in formal education and to have made less achievement in the time they did attend then have persons of higher socio-economic status (Moles, 1967; Anderson and Nemi, 1970). These people are not found to be as educa-

tionally oriented in that though they have aspirations, they do not as readily identify participation in formal education as a process to attain the fulfillment of their aspirations (Burman, 1959). The withdrawal from social participation is depicted by Anderson and Nemi (1970):

> The disadvantaged have the lowest income, the poorest education, the largest families, the highest incidence of ill health, the least chance of employment and little promise of a better future. In addition, the disadvantaged are hampered by certain psychological disabilities including a lack of self-confidence, low self-esteem and a high degree of dependency. Because of their limited perception of the value of education, the disadvantaged display neither aspiration nor motivation to achieve educational goals. Their lack of verbal facility impedes communication with other than their own kind. Consequently, they become outcasts, withdraw further into their own sub-cultural milieu. In time, the relationship between the disadvantaged and others becomes increasingly tenuous so that the possibilities of communication are lessened and the opportunity for community involvement becomes minimal (p. 28).

A negative experience with prior formal education was reported as a factor related to adult non-participation in adult education programs. Using a semantic differential technique, Averill (1962) found the adult non-participant significantly more negative in his response to "classroom," "teacher," "study," and "examinations." Further, studies of pre-adult high school dropouts have shown a tendency for the dropout to remain a non-participant as an adult. Cantoni (1955) wrote, "Only in rare instances did (pre-adult) dropouts take further course work after they left school, but a majority of high school graduates furthered their educational preparation...(p. 353)." Green (1961) interviewed high school graduates and dropouts at least ten years after they had left school. He observed that while one hundred per cent of the graduates continued their education in some formal way, only twenty-five per cent of the dropouts did so. Further, Green asserted that the dropout, if he does join an organization, would most likely join one of a social nature. Such an observation is in concurrence with a conclusion of Burman (1959).

The tendency to remain a non-participant, once having dropped out of education, was related to Adult Basic Education by Ferguson, Gimsley, and Perry (1969) who found adults who dropped out of the ABE program more often reported they planned no further educational endeavors than did those adults who completed their ABE programs.

Participants and non-participants have been differentiated on several factors other than prior educational experience. Teichert (1969) distinguished the participant in university adult evening programs as significantly younger; less satisfied with job and income; more geographically mobile; more participating in other out-of-the-house activities; and less often owns his own home.

Moss (1968) and Douglah and Moss (1968) reported on interviews with the residents of Columbia County, Wisconsin. The residents were divided into two groups, those with twelve grades or less and those who had completed twelve grades. Differences were noted between adult education participants and non-participants within the high and low educational groups. Age was not a significant variable for the more highly educated, while younger less educated persons participated more often than older persons. Sex and marital status were non-significant for both groups. As the number of dependent children increased, participation decreased for the lower education group; it was non-significant for high school graduates. Level of occupation was not significant. For the graduates, income did not differentiate participants, while higher income was related to increased participation for non-graduates.

Summary of Procedures and Statistical Models Employed

The Adjective Check List (ACL) (Gough, 1952) was administered to all enrolling high school completion students in a community college program. The ACL consists of 300 adjectives commonly used to describe personal attributes. Subjects were asked to endorse those adjectives which described themselves and to skip those which did not. At the end of the ten-week program, the subjects were divided into two groups, those who had dropped and those who had persisted or completed the program.

The SPSS subprogram DISCRIMINANT (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, and Bent, pp. 434-467) stepwise discriminant analysis procedure was used to find the "best" set of adjectives to discriminate between the two groups. In this process, the objective is to weight and linearly combine the discriminating variables in some fashion so that the groups are forced to be as statistically distinct as possible (Nie et. al., p. 435). The probability for a variable to enter (PIN) and the probability for an entered variable to be removed (POUT) from the stepwise analysis was manipulated to reduce the variables to as few as possible while retaining at least 95% accuracy in placing dropouts and persisters in their respective groups.

The SPSS subprogram FACTOR (Nie et. al., pp. 468-514) factor analysis with Varimax rotation was employed on that set of variables retained as discriminating in the stepwise discriminate analysis. In the procedure, those clusters of variables which account for a greater than average amount (2.86%) of the total variance were retained as the "important" factors.

For the purposes of interpretation of the factors, two procedures were used. First, while all ACL variables make some contribution to each factor,

only those with a factor loading of .45 or above were considered important contributors to the factor (Adelman and Morris, 1967). Secondly, the percent of endorsement for each variable in each factor was computed and the grand mean for the factor used to determine whether the factor was more descriptive of the persisters or the dropouts.

Results of the Study

One hundred forty-two (142) adult high school completion students registered in the programs used for this investigation. Female enrollees numbered eighty two (82) while sixty (60) were male. The age range was from 16 to 63. The median age of the sample was 24, while the mean age was three years younger. At the end of the tenth week, 113 students had either completed their GED tests or were still persuing their educational goals. These were classified as persisters. The other 29 students had left their programs and were classified as dropouts. No efforts were made to determine the reasons for the students non-persistence.

In the stepwise discriminant analysis procedure, the probability for any ACL variable to enter the analysis (PIN) was set at .08 while the probability for any variable to be retained in the analysis after entering (POUT) was set at .92. After 37 steps, no further variables enter and only 35 of the original 300 were retained or the best discriminators between the persister and dropout groups. Figure 1 provides an alphabetical listing of the 35 retained variables.

FIGURE 1

ACL VARIABLES RETAINED BY STEPWISE DISCRIMINATE ANALYSIS

blustery	fickle	rude	superstitious
cheerful	gloomy	sensitive	tactless
complicated	hard headed	severe	tough
conceited	impulsive	shrewd	trusting
curious	inventive	smug	unaffected
dependent	mannerly	spendthrift	unintelligent
determined	perservering	spunky	warm
disorderly	precise	stingy	whiny
distrustful	progressive	stubborn	

Overall, the 35 variables retained by the stepwise discriminate analysis procedure properly predicted group membership with 97.9% accuracy. The procedure proved slightly more accurate for predicting persisters (98.2%) then dropouts (96.6%). Both predictions were above the 95% accuracy level set for the investigation. Table 1 shows the group classification predictions of the 35 variables retained in the stepwise discriminate analysis.

The 35 ACL variables found to be the "best" discriminators between persisters and dropouts were then factored. This procedure produced 13 factors which were retained as "important factors" in that they accounted for more than an average amount of the variance. Those individual variables with a factor loading with at least .45 were used for interpretation of the factor. The grand mean of the percent of endorsement for each of the variables within the factor was used to determine whether the factor was more descriptive of the persisters or the dropouts. Those factors (1,2, and 9) were found to have higher persister endorsement while 8 factors (3,5,6,7,8,10,11,12, and 13) were most often endorsed by dropouts. One factor (4) was equally endorsed by both groups. Figure 2 arrayst the retained ACL variables by factor and by group.

TABLE 1

CLASSIFICATION RESULTS OF THE STEPWISE DISCRIMINATE ANALYSIS

Actual	N	Predicted Group Membership	
		Dropouts	Persisters
Dropouts			
Number	29	28	1
Percent		96.6%	3.4%
Persisters			
Number	113	2	111
Percent		1.8%	98.2%

Percent of "grouped" cases correctly classified: 97.89%

FIGURE 2

ACL VARIABLES BY FACTORS BY GROUP

Factors With Higher Persister Endorsement

Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 9
cheerful	inventive	perservering
mannerly	precise	precise
progressive	shrewd	unaffected
trusting	tough	
warm		

Factors with Higher Dropout Endorsement

Factor 3	Factor 5	Factor 6
complicated	distrustful	hard headed
disorderly	unintelligent	stubborn
gloomy		
severe		

Factor 7	Factor 8	Factor 10
impulsive	fickle	rude
superstitious	spendthrift	

Factor 11	Factor 12	Factor 13
determined	curious	blustery
sensitive	dependent	

Factor Equally Endorsed by Both Groups

Factor 4
conceited
stingy
whiny

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this investigation was to identify a reduced set of ACL variables which would discriminate between persisters and dropouts with at least 95% accuracy.

The ACL was administered to 142 enrolling high school completion students. At the end of ten weeks, 29 students had dropped their studies while 113 either completed or were still active in the program. Through stepwise discriminate analysis, 35 ACL variables were found to predict group membership above the 95% accuracy level set as acceptable for the study. It is therefore concluded that a reduced number of ACL self descriptive adjectives can be used for projecting group membership and thus identify those students with higher attrition risk.

In general, persisting students endorsed more positive adjectives as describing themselves. Factor 1 seemed to reflect words which speak of openness and a willingness to adjust to given situations. The words in factors 2 and 9 speak of an ability to set goals, and pursue them effectively while maintaining the flexibility to escape rigid adherence to a single path.

Dropouts used many more negative adjectives to describe themselves. There is a general tone of malaise and resignation to life in the words. Factors 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 13 find these students saying their lives are disorderly and that they have a limited repertoire of resources and responses to bring to situations. They report feeling threatened and in turn reactive rather than proactive.

Factors 11 and 12 may be somewhat contravailing. Though mathematically congruent, these factors pose some conceptual problems. In 11, they describe

themselves as "determined" and "sensitive," while their general pattern speaks of oversensitivity with a reaction "determined" withdrawal and retreat behind a veil of confrontation. In factor 12, they endorse both "curious" and "dependent." Again the general pattern would not seem to support the usual descriptors associated with a "curious" person. However, there is support for a concept of dependency and lack of effective self-determination.

In general, it was found that at the time of enrollment the self-concept as described by personally endorsed adjectives can separate those students who have high attrition risk from those who persist. Further work is needed to perfect the identification process and to generalize it to a more comprehensive high school completion population. With better identification, possible additional research will need to be conducted to find those strategies which maximize persistance among those with high attrition risk.

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